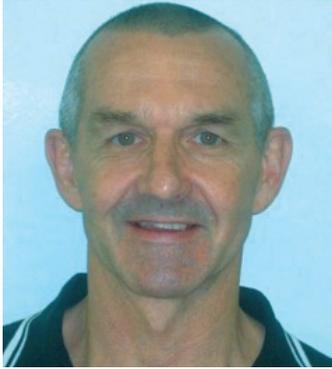


Conferences – do they still serve a purpose?



Methods of communicating new information have undergone a rapid change. Twenty years ago it was important to go to conferences to remain at the cutting edge of a discipline or specialty. New information was presented at conferences, often months or years before it appeared in print. Experts in the field were invited to present exhaustive overviews on a topic.

Other researchers presented their research findings in either oral or poster presentations. A prerequisite was that the data had not been presented or published before. In this era it was tantamount to professional suicide if you missed a major conference. Conferences stimulated new ideas and ensured that as a scientist or practitioner, one stayed abreast of the trends and new findings in a field.

The role of the conference has been challenged with the development of the Internet. Now communication can occur instantaneously with anyone, anywhere, anytime in the world. Discussions on any topic can occur through online blogs. Professional hierarchy, which often existed at conferences, disappears in a cyberspace forum. YouTube videos describing a procedure or new treatment technique can be made on a mobile phone and uploaded immediately. In short, communication has never been easier. Despite the current easy access to information, conferences have stood the test of time. Delegates are prepared to pay in the region of R25 000, all things considered, to attend an overseas conference. Why, with the easy access to information, is there still the need to go to conferences?

When faced with this question the usual knee-jerk response is that conferences provide an opportunity to meet peers and establish collaborative relationships. It is an established fact that highly connected collaborative networks have the capacity to innovate better than researchers working in an isolated environment. Attending a conference fosters new relationships and develops new relationships,

something that cannot be done effectively at a distance using communication via the Internet. Conference organisers are starting to realise this and design conferences with more breakaway groups, more interactive symposia and more social functions.

Alumni groups often meet at conferences, as do editorial boards of journals and members of international working groups. The academic presentations are almost an excuse for scientists and practitioners to be able to get together and establish working relationships.

However, not everyone shares the viewpoint that conferences have a consistently positive purpose. John Ioannidis writes that the wholesale acceptance of conferences is questionable.¹ From a holistic perspective the cost of a conference to the planet is excessive – it has been estimated that the airline fuel carrying participants around the globe to a typical international conference amounts to an environmental burden of about 10 000 tons of carbon.¹ He also questions the quality of data presented as short communications at conferences. Academics have to submit abstracts to the conference to qualify for funding from their institutions. Conference organisers make this easy by having limited peer review of the abstracts and encourage submission to boost numbers (and profit margins). Even if a conference does have peer review for the acceptance of the abstract, an abstract of questionable standard can slip through because the quality of the research can be masked by a well-written abstract. This is borne out by the fact that most abstracts presented at conferences are not converted to full peer-reviewed papers. The viewpoint of Ioannidis certainly has merit and should be considered next time a decision is made about the pros and cons of attending an upcoming conference.

This edition of the journal has a variety of original research papers, a case study and a commentary. Enjoy the read!

Mike Lambert

Editor-in-Chief

1. Ioannidis JPA. Are medical conferences useful? And for whom? JAMA 2012;307(12):1257-1258.